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ABSTRACT

The 100th anniversary of Ulysses S. Grant's death was observed on July 23, 1985. The Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery featured an exhibit of Grant portraiture, which covered his life, from its humble beginnings to military and political triumphs and to failures and disappointment. The exhibit included pictures, artifacts, and momentos from various times in Grant's life. His military service and two terms as President were emphasized. Grant's changing features were portrayed in photographs, paintings, and engravings from different times in his life span. These portraits seem to show an impassive and lackluster man, a rather ordinary person with little hint of greatness. Yet Grant's seeming ordinariness was a mask for keen intelligence and uncommon military leadership ability. His common ways appealed to masses of common men and enabled General Ulysses S. Grant to lead them to victory in the Civil War. A chronology of main events in Grant's life appears at the end of this essay. (JP)

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PORTRAIT GALLERY ILLUMINATES--GRANT'S TRIUMPHS, FAILURES

by

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PORTRAIT GALLERY ILLUMINATES--GRANT'S TRIUMPHS, FAILURES

by Robert G. Lambert Jr., Ph.D.

General Ulysses S. Grant could do two things well--he could fight, and he could write. Both his military orders and his acclaimed autobiography are considered classics of succinct clarity. Yet all his other professional efforts--including his Presidency--ended in varying degrees of failure or bankruptcy.

The story of Grant's life (1822-1885) contains equal measures of Horatio Alger and Greek tragedy. Grant was born in Point Pleasant, Ohio on April 27, 1822, the son of a tanner and farmer. He graduated from West Point in 1843 and served with distinction in the Mexican War. Returned to civilian life, he tried farming, wood-selling, land speculation, and poolhall management, all with little success.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Grant returned to the Army. In the summer of 1861, he was Colonel of the 21st Illinois Volunteer Infantry. By 1862 his military skill had come to President Lincoln's attention, and two years later he was appointed as the Commander of all the Union armies. Four years later he was the nation's President, serving two increasingly scandal-ridden terms before retiring to engage in a two and one-half year world tour.

It was during this tour he observed that Venice would be "a nice city if only they drained it."

On returning to the United States, he was refused the Republican nomination for a third term ("It is very difficult to decline a thing which has never been offered"). He then entered a Wall Street business venture with a crooked partner, and suddenly found himself personally impoverished and deeply in debt to those who had trusted him.

It was then that Grant began his greatest battle--a bout with throat cancer attributed in part to the cigar habit he developed early in the War.

Mark Twain had offered Grant a seventy per cent royalty for the two volumes of his Memoirs. After writing about half of Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant, cancer caused Grant great pain and disability. Still, he finished the Memoirs, which became a national best-seller, erasing his debt and leaving his family prosperous. He died a few weeks after its completion, plunging the nation, both North and South, into intense grief and mourning, perhaps only matched by the deaths of Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy.

The irony of Southern grief resulted from the consideration he showed Lee at the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, where Grant offered magnanimous terms to Lee and his officers. "Lee," said Grant, "would have done the same for me had he won." Grant's willingness to preserve the dignity of the Confederate Army saved many Southern leaders from the hangman's noose, and it ingratiated

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him to the South's soldiers and their families.

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Grant's death on July 23, 1885, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery is featuring an exhibit of Grant portraiture, which will remain on display through November 11, 1985. After its closing in Washington, the exhibit will be moved to Austin, Texas, where it will be shown at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library from January 10th to May 4th, 1986.

Rather than concentrating on a single period of Grant's life, such as the Civil War or the Presidency, the exhibit covers his entire life--from obscurity to triumph and from triumph to political and financial disgrace. Though Grant was personally honest, his judgment of others was often faulty. Aware of this shortcomimg, he once commented he was glad he was not a woman, as he found it almost impossible to say "No."

The exhibition also includes coverage of the financial redemption the Grant family experienced with the posthumous publication of Memoirs.

In addition to pictures, other historic artifacts and mementos are on display, including the pen used by Grant and Lee to end the Civil War. This pen, perhaps like Grant, is striking in its very ordinariness: it is a simple wooden pen, metal-nibbed and splintered at the top--the kind school children learned to write with in the generations before ball points.

Perhaps most interesting is a gold-plated sword presented to

PORTRAIT GALLERY ILLUMINATES

Grant by grateful officers after the Civil War. This sword, along with elephant tusks from Siam, campaign maps, military uniforms and insignia, was discovered by an incredulous William Vanderbilt in the foyer of his New York City mansion upon his return from a European trip. Grant's Wall Street business had failed, leaving him $150,000 in debt to Vanderbilt. Grant attempted to use his most precious possessions to repay at least part of his debt.

An embarrassed Vanderbilt urged Grant to retain these priceless keepsakes, but Grant refused to accept them back. Vanderbilt then offered them to Mrs. Grant as part of her estate, provided she give them to the Federal government at or before her death. Accepting them, Mrs. Grant promptly gave them to the Smithsonian, where they now comprise the Grant-Vanderbilt collection.

Other items on display include Grant's death mask by Karl Gerhardt, revealing the weary battler at rest at last; Mark Twain's royalty check for $200,000 presented to Mrs. Grant after the Memoirs had become a national best seller; and even a pawn ticket for a gold watch Grant had hocked to buy Christmas presents for his family.

IMAGES OF GRANT

Most of the exhibit portrays the changing features of Grant, including a tintype from 1843 showing him beardless shortly after he graduated from West Point. Another misleading portrait featuring a full-bearded Grant became the basis of the engraving for the $50 bill. Yet Grant normally kept his beard shortly trimmed because his wife found the full beard "too shaggy."

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PORTRAIT GALLERY ILLUMINATES

Of course the portraits vary with the skill of the artist and the mood of Grant, but in the main these images convey little emotion or character. In part this was a direct reflection of his impassive nature. His was a classic stone face displaying virtually no emotion, whatever the occasion or tumult around him. He was impassive on hearing of Lincoln's death, and once he watched emotionlessly as a close friend was dragged to his death when he failed to leap aboard the railway carriage carrying Grant.

Grant's emotionless quality--his eyes were termed "fishy in their immobility"--gave him a reputation for calm under stress, whatever emotions boiled below his surface. Even amid the carnage of the battlefield he often whittled calmly while seated upon his favorite mount Cincinnati. Yet this impassivity served him less well as President: one morning, when a particularly odious scoundrel was forced to resign from his administration, Grant displayed his usual lack of emotion. An observer jotted, "Grant's imperturbability is amazing...I am in doubt whether to call it greatness or stupidity."

Certainly Grant was personally unprepossessing. Even as a general he dressed casually, even sloppily. At one military meeting, a subordinate greeted a spiffily uniformed and bearded surgeon as "General Grant," unable to conceive that the minor figure to one side could ever be the general.

Constant comments were made by observers about his ordinariness, accented by his relatively short height of five feet,

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eight inches. Yet to a historian like Bruce Catton, Grant's ordinariness--like Lincoln's common touch--was not only a mask for acute intelligence, but a symbol of the average man--the representative conscience and consciousness of a people, rising up to lead the forces of the Northern cause.

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Robert G. Lambert Jr. is a professor of journalism and American literature. His most recent academic post was at Virginia State University in Petersburg, Va.

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CHRONOLOGY OF GENERAL U. S. GRANT
APRIL 27, 1822 -- JULY 23, 1885

Based on a Chronology compiled by
General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall from
Grant as a Military Commander, Van Nostrand, 1970.

April 27, 1822	Hiram Ulysses Grant born in Ohio
June 14, 1839	Mix-up in name registers Ulysses Simpson Grant as West Point cadet
July, 1843	From West Point, Grant commissioned in 4th Infantry
March, 1846	Mexican War begins
September 13, 1847	Grant promoted on battlefield to Brevet Captain
February 2, 1848	Mexican War ends
August 22, 1848	Grant marries Julia Dent
March, 1852	Grant's regiment ordered to California
July 31, 1854	Grant resigns Army commission
October 16, 1859	John Brown's raid
November 6, 1860	Lincoln elected
April 12, 1861	Civil War starts
April 23, 1861	Grant rejoins Army at Springfield, Ill.
June 17, 1861	Grant promoted to Colonel
August 7, 1861	Grant promoted to Brigadier-General
February 6, 1862	Grant captures Ft. Henry (Tenn.)
February 16, 1862	Grant captures Ft. Donelson and is promoted to Major-General of Volunteers
April 6-7, 1862	Grant and Buell defeat Johnston and Beauregard at Shiloh

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GRANT CHRONOLOGY

July 11, 1862	Grant appointed by Lincoln to command Armies of Tennessee and Mississippi
October 3-4, 1862	Grant defeats Van Dorn at Corinth, Miss.
October 16, 1862	Grant takes command of the Department of Tennessee
January 1, 1863	Emancipation Proclamation
July 1-4, 1863	Battle of Gettysburg
July 4, 1863	Vicksburg falls to Grant; Grant promoted to Major-General
November 24-25, 1863	Battle of Chattanooga; Grant defeats Bragg
March 3, 1864	Lincoln brings Grant to Washington to command Union Army
March 9, 1864	Grant promoted to Lieutenant General
May 4-6, 1864	Wilderness Battle between Grant and Lee in Virginia
May 9-19, 1864	Battle of Spotsylvania, Va.
June 1-3, 1864	Lee repulses Grant at Cold Harbor
July 30, 1864	Petersburg mine crater attack fails
November 8, 1864	Lincoln re-elected
February 9, 1865	Lee appointed Commander of all Confederate forces
April 2, 1865	Lee abandons Petersburg and Richmond
April 9, 1865	Lee surrenders at Appomattox
April 14, 1865	Lincoln assassinated
November 4, 1868	Grant elected President
November 4, 1872	Grant re-elected President
July 25, 1885	Grant dies after completing Memoirs

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